A Comprehensive Examination of Trumpism:

American Politics as a Zero-Sum Game

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation *with research distinction* in Political Science in the undergraduate college of The Ohio State University

By

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the effects of demographics on modern American electoral politics. Despite recent sociological works and media conjecturing, there is little agreement on increasing polarization and among what lines the poles have been pulled to. This thesis includes data from the 2019 American Community Survey Five Year Estimates in its Ordinary Least Squares regression model which accounts for divisions among racial, economic class, and geographic differences. Using this data, I find a shifting partisan alignment on educational and urban-rural fronts, while racial divides have continued at roughly the same rate as in the past. I also find evidence of retrospective economic voting in the 2020 presidential election. These findings confirm the theories put forth by sociologists that American politics are becoming more polarized than at any point in modern history, and it proposes that the ideological homogenization of both the Democratic and Republican parties is to blame.
Keywords: polarization, zero-sum game, ideological homogenization

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"[The ruling of the 9th Circuit Court] puts us at a competitive disadvantage relative to Democrats. Politics is a zero-sum game, and every extra vote they get through unlawful interpretations of Section 2 hurts us. It's the difference between winning an election 50 to 49 and losing." Michael Carvin in Brnovich v. DNC, March 2, 2021

1 Introduction

On the morning of November 9, 2016, Democrats across the country were shocked to see the results displayed on their televisions. Even the most reputable Trump-friendly model, FiveThirtyEight's presidential model, only predicted him with a 30% chance of victory on election day (Silver, 2016). While there were systematic polling errors at work that led to the surprise after the results were tallied, what carried President Trump across the finish line were changes in America's demographic breakdown over the past fifty years and his ability to harness the divisions brought about by those changes (Silver, 2016).

As these demographics have shifted, so too have attitudes about them. As sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild notes in her 2015 book *Strangers In Their Own Land,*

> "You are patiently standing in a long line for something called the American dream. You are white, Christian, of modest means, and getting along in years. You are male. There are people of color behind you, and in principle you wish them well. But you've waited long, worked hard, and the line is barely moving. Then you see people cutting in line ahead of you. Who are these interlopers? Some are black, others immigrants, refugees. They get affirmative action, sympathy, and welfare--checks for the listless and idle. The government wants you to feel sorry for them. The liberal media mocks you as racist or homophobic. Everywhere you look, you feel betrayed." (Hochschild, 2015)

While her work focused entirely on the lives of Lousianans, a group often portrayed to be inherent populists after the legacy of Huey Long, as early as 2004, history scholar Thomas Frank began writing about the fundamental transformation of the state of Kansas, which had previously been at the forefront of the far-left movement. Dr. Katherine Cramer detailed the rural versus urban conflicts of Wisconsin and the rise of Governor Scott Walker in *The Politics of Resentment (2016).* While many of the prominent works of today document the phenomenon of zero-sum politics and the politics of backlash and resentment, they do not offer insight into what the fracturing of our society into modern tribes looks like for our electoral politics on a quantitative front.

There is no shortage of prominent figures opining about the death of the American Dream or the end of American society as they have known it. This paper aims to put their theories under the empirical microscope and see if the anecdotal evidence holds up to the numbers. Fortunately, their work paints an identifiable picture: to them, American elections are a zero-sum game. When the urbanites win, the rural voters lose. When the white voters win, minority voters lose. This is the foundation of zero-sum identity politics: people of different races, educational and geographic backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses sorting into self-identifying groups and voting accordingly.

While identity politics are nothing new to American politics, they have never been able to be exploited on the level that they are now. Campaigns have access to census information and the characteristics of the voter age population in a way they never have before. Demographic information is available down to the precinct and can be exploited to reverse the minimal effects hypothesis**,** or the idea that campaigning only has a limited effect on the actual outcome of an election. To that end, there has never been a greater understanding on the sociological and

political fronts of voting and the decision to vote and not vote than there is at present. The culmination of academic research and ushering in of the new era of "Big Data" have led to an unprecedented age which allows campaigns to microtarget—to pick voters apart from their peers with new information available from the internet. The election "game" is getting closer to having perfect information with every passing day. This begs the question: who plays the game are, how is it played, and how does it lead to polarization?

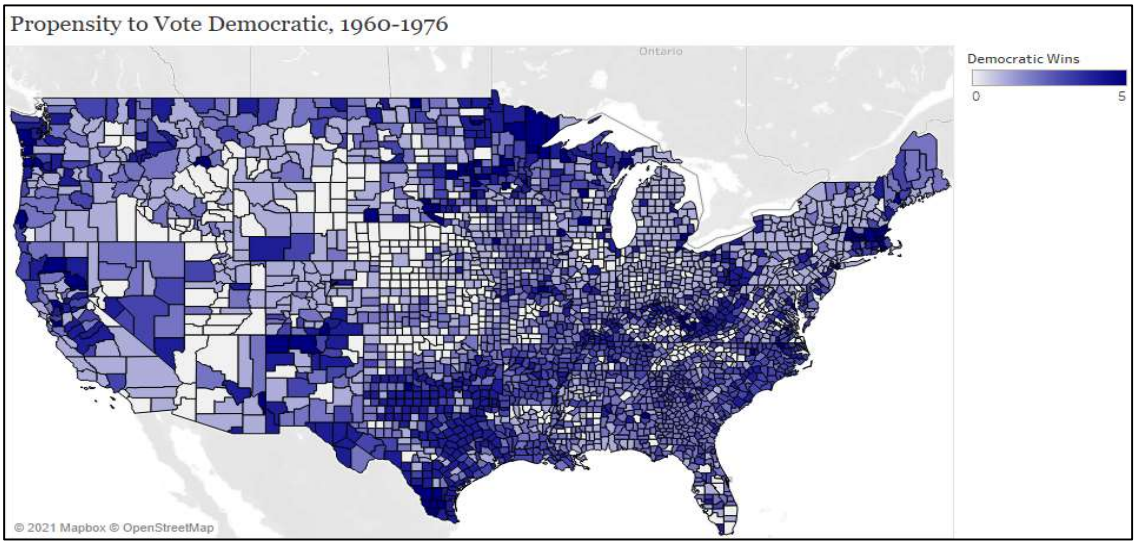
2 Background

Most scholars would agree that American politics have become increasingly partisan since the Republican Revolution of 1994 when Republicans took control of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty-one years. While it was once common for the two prominent parties to contain a great deal of ideological diversity, the lines have been drawn rather plainly. The thought of a conservative Democrat or a liberal Republican today is almost comical. While many have been skeptical of the partisan divide and the emergence of polarization after the "de-alignment" of the second half of the twentieth century, scholarship abounds to the contrary (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005, Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008, Thierault, 2006 among many).

2.1 Rising Rigidity

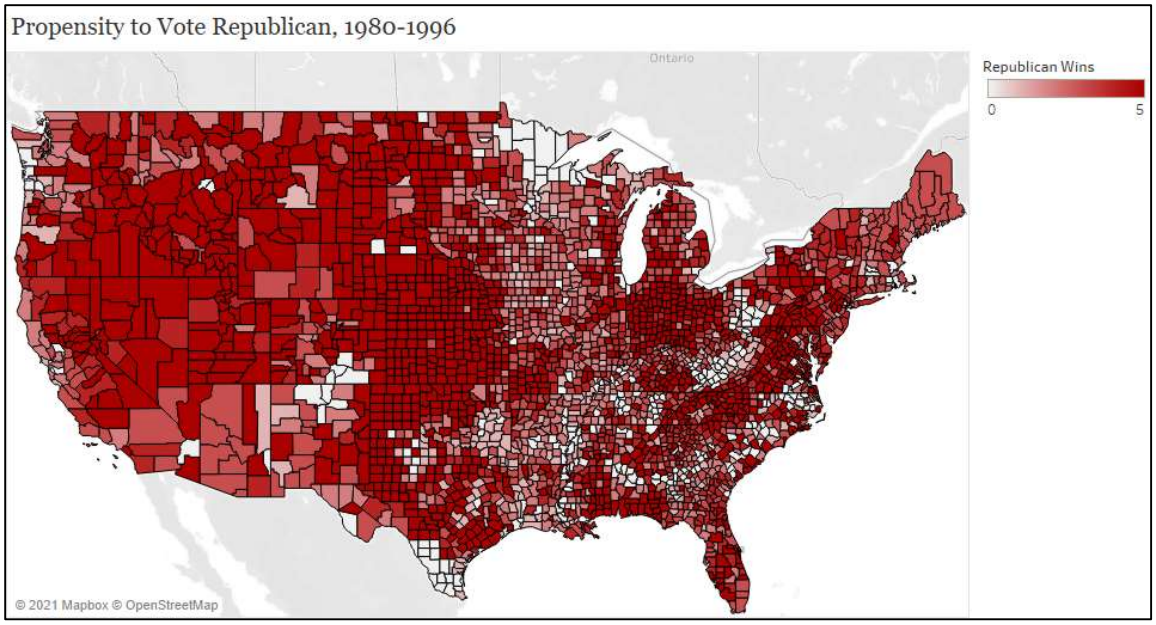
The geographic elasticity among the electorate in whether to choose the Democratic or Republican candidate has waned significantly over the past sixty years. From 1960 through 1976, there were three Democratic victories out of a possible five at the presidential level. Over this time, there were 375 counties that never voted for a Democrat, 429 that voted once, 907 that voted twice, 779 that voted three times, 420 that voted four times and 89 that voted for the Democratic candidate all five times. Democratic performance is shown in Map 1 below. On its

own, this may not seem too different, but by modern standards, this is an incredible geographic performance for Democrats.



Map 1

Compared to the Democratic from 1960 to 1976, the three Republican victories from 1980 through 1996 are much more geographically impressive. From Ronald Reagan's win in 1980 through Bill Clinton's win in 1996, there were three Republican victories. Over this time, 281 counties voted for the Republican zero times, 234 voted for the Republican once, 484 voted for the Republican twice, 459 voted for the Republican three times, 385 voted for the Republican four times, and 1,270 voted for the Republican all five times. There was a serious increase in county-level party loyalty.

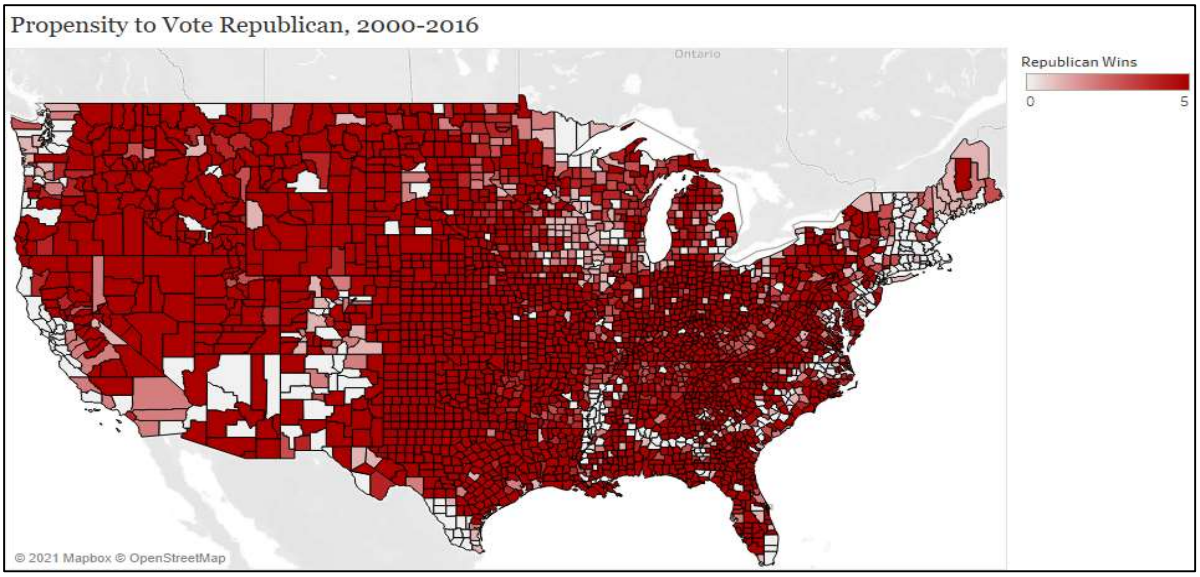


Map 2

From George Bush's win in 2000 through Donald Trump's win in 2016, there were three Republican victories out of a possible five elections. Over this time, 356 counties voted for the Republican zero times, 146 voted for the Republican once, 141 voted for the Republican twice times, 145 voted for the Republican three times, 236 voted for the Republican four times, and 2,089 voted for Republican all five times.

Number of Times a County Voted One Way	Republican Wins *1980-1996*	Republican Wins *2000-2016*	Difference
Zero	281	356	-75
One	234	146	-88
Two	484	141	-343
Three	459	145	-314
Four	385	236	-149
Five	1,270	2,089	+819

Table 1



Map 3

The elasticity, or the propensity to vote for more than one party, of both counties and states has declined significantly in the United States since the presidential election of 1980. In modern American politics, this has led to the emergence of pivotal pivot states in close races. While there has always been one state that lifts a candidate into victory by crossing the 270 electoral vote threshold, this tipping point state has become increasingly important as presidential elections have become closer over time. There is a large body of work reflecting on the states which hold the most power in the electoral college. Much of this work is flawed in that it cannot hold up to the political trends of today. John Wright notes that from 1948 through 1984, the larger states of Ohio, California, Illinois, Texas, and New York were the most powerful states in the electoral college (Wright, 2009). As he also notes, Gelman, et al. (2004) found that these states hold considerably less power today despite still having some of the most electoral votes. As states (and the counties that comprise them) have become more inelastic in the past sixty years, the states which really hold the power in the electoral college are those which have retained their elasticity, or at the very least, their ability to vote for one party or the other.

There are three useful trends from the data presented in Figure 1: 1) regardless of if they win the election, Republicans are winning the vast majority of the counties in the United States every four years, and this is a new development; 2) presidential elections have gotten significantly closer over the last sixty years; and 3) there is a correlation between the number of states won and electoral votes won.

Figure 1

2.2 Hypotheses in Sociology

This points to a hypothesis proposed by Dr. Katherine Cramer in her book, *The Politics of Resentment* (2016). In a years long study of the politics of Wisconsinites, Cramer finds a sharp contrast between those living in rural areas versus those who live in Milwaukee and Madison. For those in urban areas, no mind was paid to those in the rural. For those in the rural areas, they felt that they were not getting their fair share of attention from their state government. From Cramer:

> The sense of identity as people from a place that was disadvantaged economically coexisted with the perception that wherever their hard-earned money was going, it was not coming to them. It seemed instead to be going, in part, to bloated government programs and overpaid and underworked public employees. (pg. 148)

The rural animosity toward urban areas not only manifested itself in the form of dislike of a large government but as a dislike and distrust of government employees and urban residents themselves. This suggests a strong understanding of politics by rural Wisconsinites as zero-sum. In fact, Cramer writes directly:

> I draw attention to a kind of politics in which people do not focus their blame on elite decision makers as they try to comprehend an economic recession. Instead, they give their attention to fellow residents who they think are eating their share of the pie. These interpretations are encouraged, perhaps fomented, by political leaders who exploit these divisions for political gain. (pg. 6)

While there appears to be evidence for this at a glance of geopolitical trendlines, it tracks in experimental research as well.

Davidai and Ongis (2019) found that among self-identifying liberals and conservatives, there was a significant tendency to view American elections as zero-sum. For liberals, there is a tendency to exhibit zero-sum thinking when the status quo is being upheld; for conservatives, there is a tendency to exhibit zero-sum thinking when the status quo is being challenged (Davidai and Ongis, 2019). This finding lends itself to another hypothesis on polarization proposed by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild. She suggests that there is a relationship between changing racial demographics and a propensity to vote for conservative candidates. From her 2016 book *Strangers in their Own Land:*

> Blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, brown pelicans—all have cut ahead of you in line. But it's people like you who have made this country great. You feel uneasy. It has to be said: the line cutters irritate you. They are violating rules of fairness. You resent them, and you feel it's right that you do. So do your friends. Fox commentators reflect your feelings, for your deep story is also the Fox News deep story.

The source of this distrust is easily-diagnosed: for many conservatives, they view the country as one where there is an in-crowd of real Americans who made the country great—hard-working whites who honored their family's legacies by taking care of the grounds their ancestors once tilled, living in the houses of their forefathers, and being a good neighbor to those around them who did the same. Those who did not understand this were outsiders brought to destroy America. When they prospered with the aid of the government while not holding the same cultural values, it was a crime. As Hochschild notes, the migration patterns into Louisiana (where she studied) were not predominantly white.

There are other claims about what is causing polarization which have gained traction. Economic factors assert themselves into the picture. Frank (2004) characterizes the voting

patterns of working-class whites in Kansas as a case-study in how the Republican party had taken over the demographic. Bartels (2006) refuted this claim, finding that working-class whites had not changed their voting presidential voting patterns, still beholden largely to the Democratic party. Similarly, the white working-class (as of 2006) had not become more conservative, and economic issues were still more strongly correlated to presidential votes than social issues (Bartels, 2006). Gelman, et al. (2010) note that poorer individuals nationwide are more likely to vote Democratic while richer individuals are more likely to vote Republican on average. They further address the paradox of richer states voting Democratic by noting that in these states, voter partisanship is less likely to be stratified by class (Gelman, et al., 2010). Other research has found a high correlation between income inequality and party polarization in the United States as a whole (Duca & Saving, 2014).

Looking at the whole body of work provides many competing narratives on what is truly driving polarization in the United States. There are even competing narratives on what has brought about this era of hyperpartisanship. What I aim to do is put these narratives to the test by regressing multiple variables related to their claims on the county's choice for the 2016 election.

3 Estimating the Relationship Between Variables of Interest

As discussed, increasing polarization in American politics has been attributed to income inequality (Duca and Saving, 2014), race (Hochschild, 2016), the rural versus urban divide (Cramer, 2013), anti-economic interest voting (Frank, 2003), and education by many following the 2016 election after the failure by many polls to accurately predict the outcome.

3.1 Data and Methodology

These variables can be put to the test by utilizing an Ordinary Least Squares regression model. I attained information by county on population (for rural versus urban comparison), racial demographics, median income, Gini coefficient, and education data from the American Community Survey Five-Year data estimates for 2019. The central question of polarization is not whether it is occurring, but rather, what demographics are being dragged to which poles? Are Black voters becoming more polarized toward Democrats over time? Are voters without bachelor's degrees becoming more reliably Republican? To answer these questions, I created a county-level regression model measuring several parameters: log(population), Black population percentage, Asian population percentage, Hispanic population percentage, log(median income), Gini coefficient of a given election year, a binary variable indicating the previous Democrat's win or loss, an interaction term of the Gini coefficient and the binary variable, and the percentage of the population that has attained at least a bachelor's degree. They are all regressed on the dependent variable which is the margin between the two candidates in any county measured as percent Democrat minus percent Republican. As the R^2 value increases, the margin between the presidential candidates regressed upon is explained more clearly by the given variables. Examining county-level data is not examining individual voting records—places do not vote, people do. That said, the following models are presented with caution, meant to be viewed in a Bayesian manner as part of a larger whole which tells the story of polarization.

3.2 Regression Model

	1960 ß/SE	1964 ß/SE	1968 ß/SE	1972 ß/SE	1976 ß/SE	1980 ß/SE	1984 ß/SE	1988 ß/SE
Log Population	0.41 (0.36)	2.00*** (0.04)	0.72* (0.31)	0.06 (0.27)	0.03 (0.30)	2.86*** (0.29)	1.04*** (0.27)	-0.60* (0.28)
% Black	0.73*** (0.04)	-0.97*** (0.04)	-0.003 (0.03)	-0.40*** (0.03)	0.43*** (0.03)	0.50*** (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)
% Asian	0.35 (0.21)	0.11 (0.22)	0.36* (0.18)	0.19 (0.16)	0.52** (0.17)	0.38* (0.17)	0.38* (0.16)	0.32* (0.16)
% Hispanic	0.31*** (0.03)	0.15** (0.03)	0.22*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.02)	0.06* (0.03)	-0.10*** (0.03)	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)
Log Median Income	5.70 (3.01)	8.43** (3.21)	1.82 (2.60)	-0.98 (2.28)	-6.33* (2.54)	-11.07*** (2.46)	-11.92*** (2.29)	-12.43*** (2.33)
Gini Coefficient	83.24*** (15.16)	2.82 (16.17)	40.94** (13.11)	-6.1 (11.48)	68.73*** (12.82)	69.68*** (12.41)	45.57*** (11.53)	28.5* (11.73)
Clinton Win	95.17*** (14.74)	37.81* (15.64)	5.312 (12.68)	-45.48*** (11.10)	45.20*** (12.31)	50.25*** (11.91)	-0.66 (11.06)	-18.70 (11.26)
Gini* Clinton Win	-217.18*** (31.68)	-45.11 (33.62)	19.41 (27.24)	148.48*** (23.86)	-97.18*** (26.46)	-89.05*** (25.61)	47.65*** (23.79)	90.71*** (24.21)
% Bachelors or higher	-0.63*** (0.13)	-0.77*** (0.13)	-0.60*** (0.11)	-0.31*** (0.10)	-1.26*** (0.11)	-1.27*** (0.10)	-0.87*** (0.10)	-0.62*** (0.10)
R^2	*0.202*	*0.239*	*0.125*	*0.158*	*0.158*	*0.247*	*0.357*	*0.272*

Table 2

	1992 ß/SE	1996 ß/SE	2000 ß/SE	2004 ß/SE	2008 ß/SE	2012 ß/SE	2016 ß/SE	2020 ß/SE
Log Population	1.110*** (0.23)	2.31*** (0.26)	4.39*** (0.27)	3.69*** (0.28)	3.51*** (0.31)	3.77*** (0.31)	4.28*** (0.25)	5.16*** (0.26)
% Black	-0.03 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.02*** (0.03)	0.07* (0.03)	0.28*** (0.03)	0.54** (0.03)	0.57*** (0.03)
% Asian	0.41** (0.13)	0.39** (0.15)	0.46** (0.15)	0.34* (0.16)	0.31 (0.17)	0.38* (0.18)	0.49*** (0.14)	0.32* (0.15)
% Hispanic	-0.14*** (0.02)	0.16** (0.02)	-0.23*** (0.02)	-0.30*** (0.03)	-0.18*** (0.03)	-0.08*** (0.03)	0.18*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)
Log Median Income	-13.24*** (1.95)	-10.45*** (2.20)	-10.00*** (2.25)	-14.18*** (2.33)	-9.76*** (2.56)	-8.31*** (2.60)	-6.54*** (2.10)	-3.88 (2.16)
Gini Coefficient	45.70*** (9.81)	44.82*** (11.08)	27.67* (11.35)	-26.27* (11.76)	-37.47** (12.91)	-35.08** (13.10)	-14.28 (10.59)	-2.89 (10.90)
Clinton Win	4.29 (9.42)	7.24 (10.64)	4.53 (10.90)	6.78 (11.28)	-12.50 (12.38)	-0.48 (12.56)	5.18 (10.16)	21.369 (10.45)
Gini* Clinton Win	35.83 (20.25)	40.955 (22.87)	60.92* (23.43)	70.19** (24.26)	123.90*** (26.61)	100.33*** (27.01)	82.91*** (21.85)	48.71* (22.47)
% Bachelors or higher	-0.85*** (0.08)	-1.15*** (0.09)	-0.90*** (0.09)	-0.29*** (0.10)	0.127 (0.11)	0.123 (0.11)	1.05*** (0.09)	1.477*** (0.09)
R^2	*0.297*	*0.339*	*0.448*	*0.472*	*0.478*	*0.528*	*0.716*	*0.732*

Table 3

It is clear from the regression that certain coalitions develop around certain candidates. For example, in every election from 1960 to 2004, there was significance between the voting patterns of counties that voted for the Republican candidate and counties with increased levels of college-educated voters. Beginning in 2016, this shifted, and these counties began to vote for Democrats at a significant and increasing rate. Regression modeling is not without its flaws—you cannot control for everything, but one thing is for sure: these measured characteristics explain the margins present in each county better now than at any point in time since 1960.

4 Discussion and Analysis

While the characteristics of these counties did not necessarily cause them to vote at the margins they did for candidates over time, they help explain the picture of the coalitions that have developed in each party. For example, as the Black percentage of each county increases, all else equal, on average, they are more likely to vote for the Democrat running for president. This characteristic was less true in the past due to a variety of factors, including but not limited to voting rights legislation and partisan elasticity among highly urbanized areas before white flight set in.

4.1 Examining Population Shifts

County-level data is not optimal in assessing the voting pattern shifts between the rural and urban divide, but it is still useful in doing so. There has been a significant change to the geographic distribution of the population in the last sixty years with suburbs becoming more populated as urban and rural areas have been drained (Mahtta et al., 2019). Still, using the log function to measure the population roots out the most rural from the most urban, and there is a significant effect which has been taking place since the 1992 presidential election.

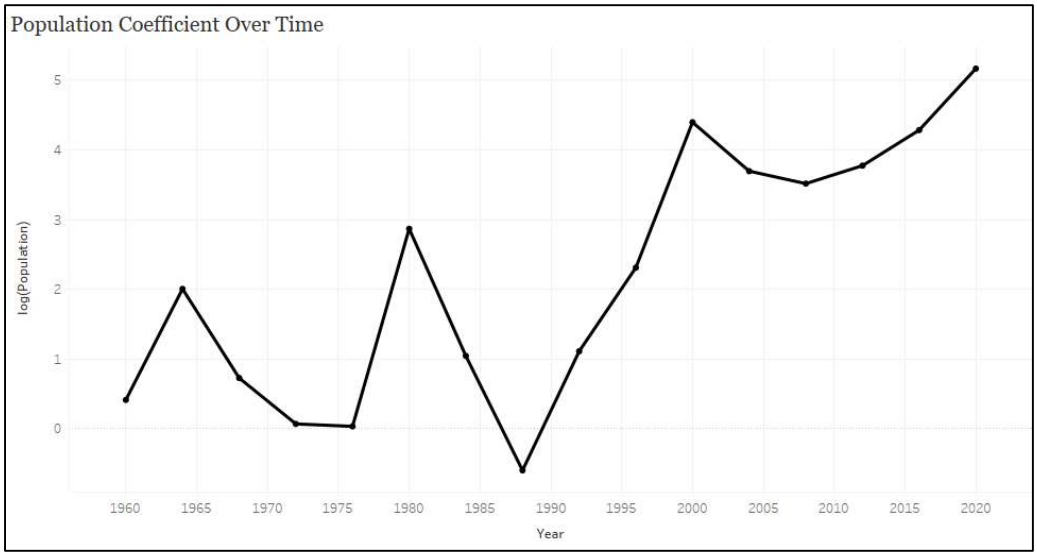


Figure 2

The story of the population coefficients confirms the rural versus urban divide taking root in American elections. There was less evidence for an urban-rural divide prior to 1988 when the country's counties had comparatively massive elasticity handing blowout wins to both Democrats and Republicans. Victories were won by Democrats with more rural support than they are today. The rural versus urban divide is only deepened by the expansion of suburbs which have served to offer not only a physical buffer between the two but an electoral one as well. While campaigns in the past won their victories with high-level (or at least, enough) support in both rural and urban counties, geographic vote polarization today is higher than at any point since 1960. Democrats are winning elections by running up the score in urban areas while Republicans are doing the opposite.

4.2 The New Education Coalition

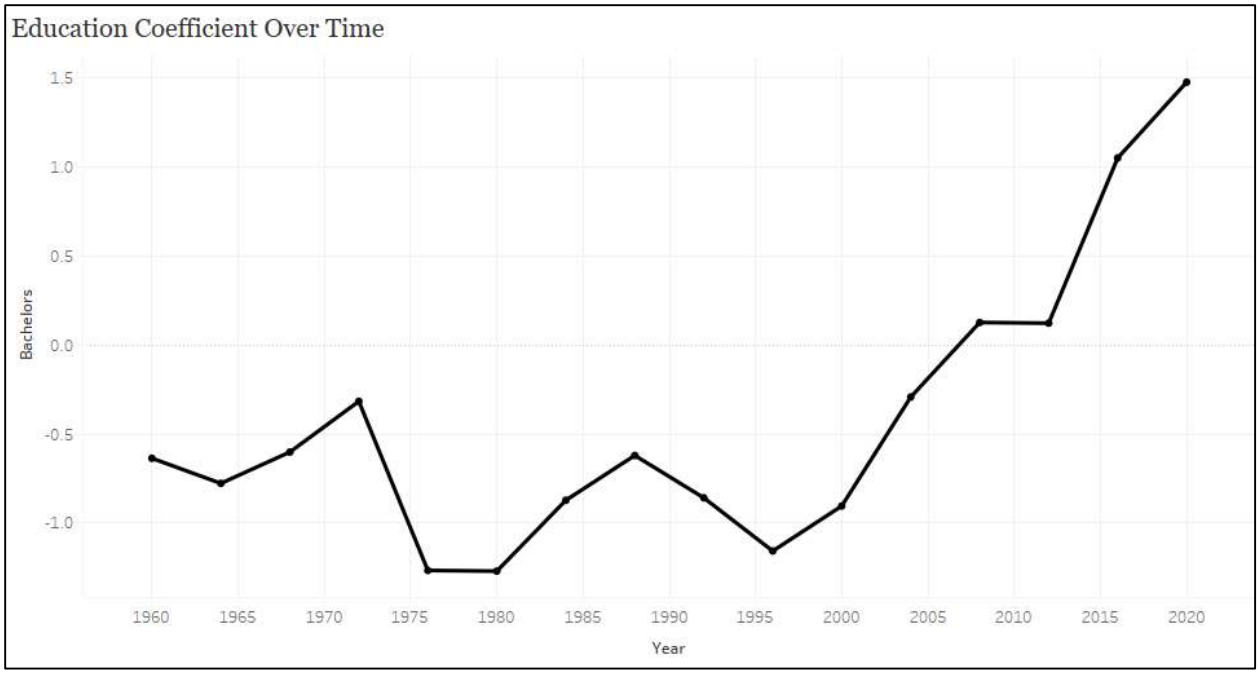


Figure 3

Highly educated places have begun to vote more Democratic on average, all else equal since 2000. Between 2004 and 2008, Democrats flipped the longstanding educated coalition which had been held by Republicans since at least 1960. In 2020, Joe Biden won in these places by an even greater margin than any Republican did in the sixty years prior. This lends itself to the more-educated suburbs of highly urbanized places, and many attribute Joe Biden's 2020 win to his increased margins in these areas. This data is consistent with exit polling and other available mediums, such as ANES data. While this shift has been occurring gradually for some time, there is still popular skepticism that there will be reversion toward Republicans. While this skepticism may be warranted, it can only be because these places voted more Democratic in 2020 than they ever voted Republican in the last sixty years. It is possible that there may be a bottoming-out effect occurring with college-educated Republican support, and the trend will likely end sooner rather than later.

4.3 Continued Racial Divisions

ANES data over time has been consistent in that minority groups have largely voted Democratic in presidential elections since the New Deal Coalition. The general trend recently for different racial blocs varies, however.

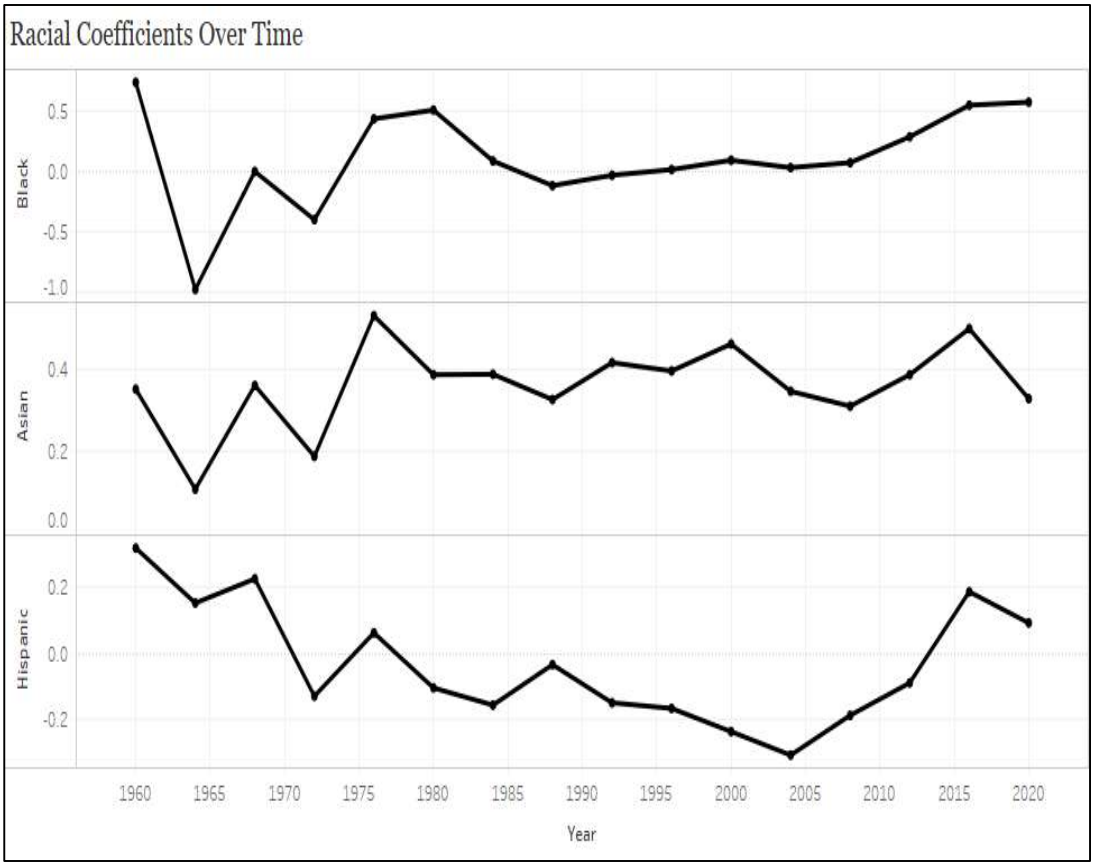


Figure 4

As the Hispanic population in the United States has increased exponentially since the 1960s, the number of counties that they have represented the most votes in has similarly increased (Flores, 2017). This trend is also similar among Asian Americans (Lopez et al., 2017). Over time, these trendlines have become more accurate in reflecting the true voting patterns of non-whites as the percent of non-whites has increased by county. Black trends are especially difficult to judge prior to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 when voter suppression ran rampant throughout majority Black communities in the American South. Their voting patterns are more difficult to see prior to and slightly after this period during implementation but stabilize beginning in about

1988, as seen in Figure 4. As the Hispanic population has increased in states like California and Texas and there are majority-Hispanic counties, this type of county-level modeling is more accurate in detailing the way that Hispanic Americans vote at-large. Note the slide in Hispanic Democratic support from 2016 to 2020.

Democrats were expecting to continue to increase their margins among Hispanic voters after the Democratic wave year of 2018 when they overperformed expectations in races like the 2018 Texas Senate race when Democrat Beto O'Rourke nearly defeated incumbent Republican Ted Cruz. Though they were not able to increase their margins, Hispanic places overall continued to overwhelmingly vote for Joe Biden. The greatest problems for Democrats arose in places like the Rio Grande Valley and Miami-Dade County, but they remain hopeful for the future there (Inskeep, 2021).

4.4 Economic Stratification

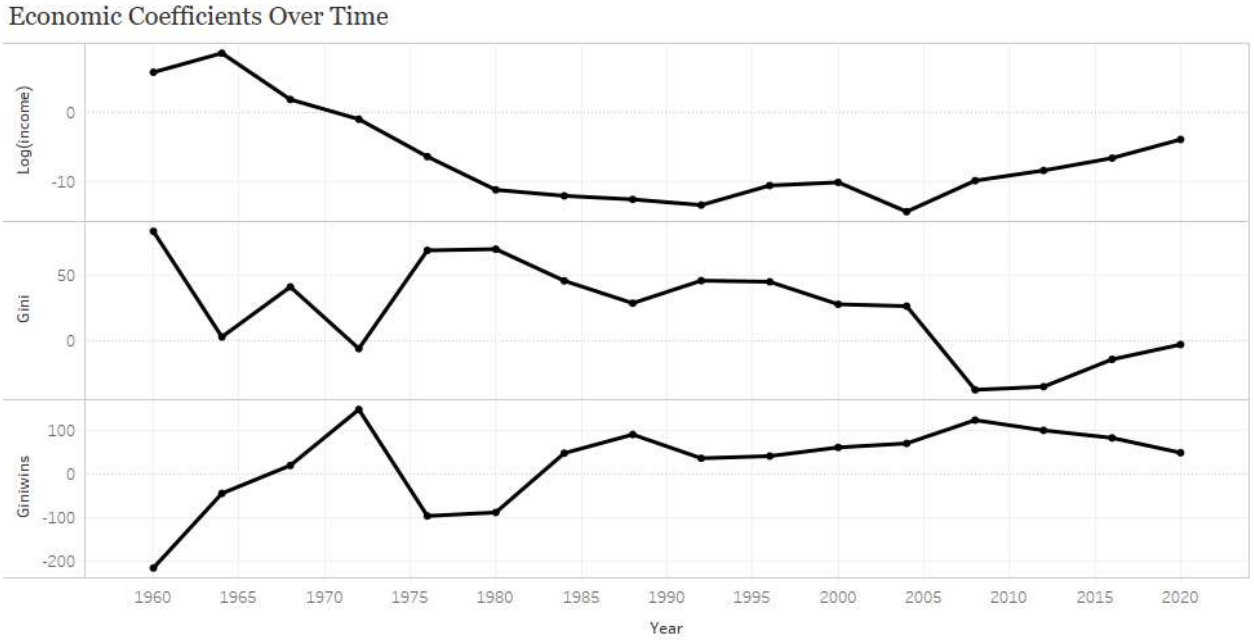


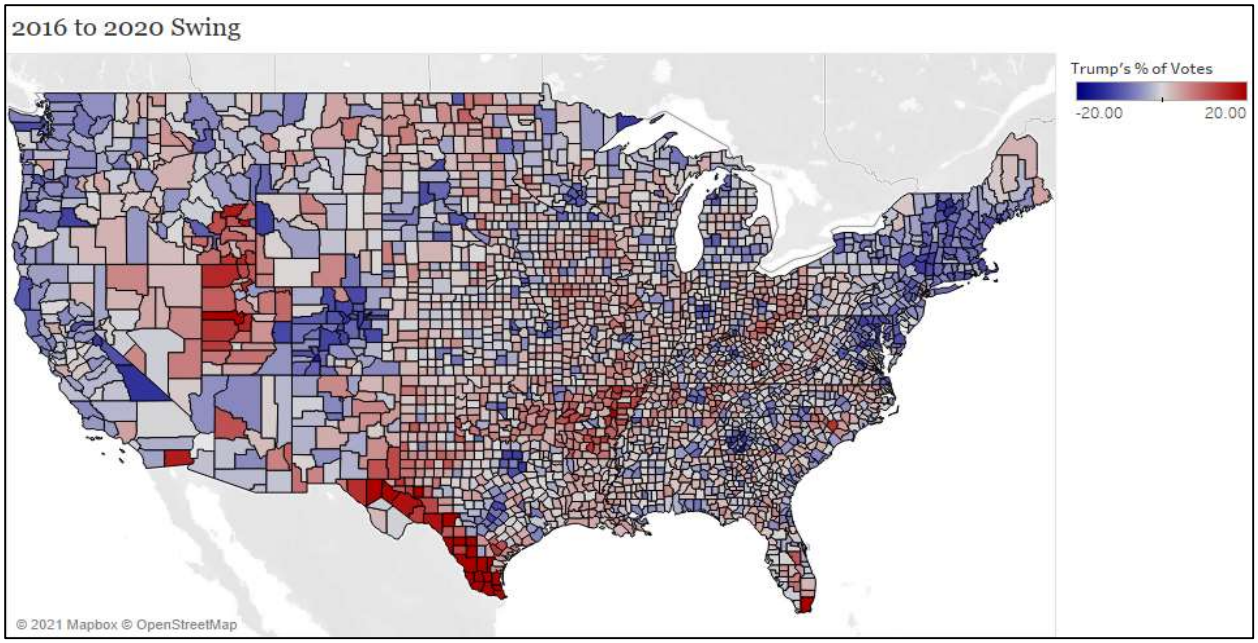
Figure 5

Though Democrats may have held the edge in wealthier counties in 1960, this peaked in Lyndon Johnson's 1964 landslide victory before steadily falling off, and they lost this coalition in 1972.

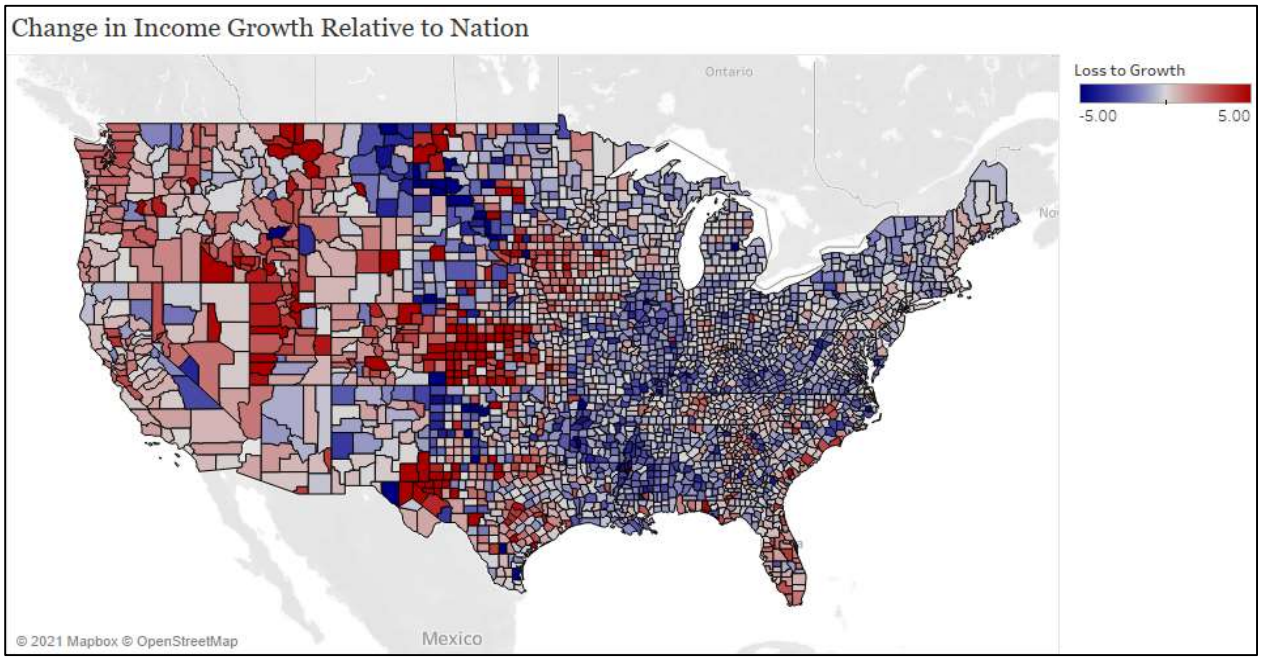
Despite still not gaining it back as of 2020, there has been a significant trend since 1988 in Democrats' direction. Wealthier counties voted at a higher rate for Joe Biden in 2020 than they have at any point since George McGovern's campaign in 1972. There is a clear trend in Democrats' direction in this direction, and at this moment, this indicates a decline in class-based voting among places.

In 2014, Duca and Saving found a significant correlation between income inequality and propensity to vote Democratic. This finding can be thought of as linking urban areas with high poverty to also have wealthy residents. Though they used an inverse Pareto-Lorenz curve, and I used the Gini coefficient, we produced the same results over the studied time period. After their study, this trend swung back toward zero, and the correlation between the Gini coefficient and the margin between the vote shares of both parties has been insignificant at the county level since 2016. Similarly, Duca and Saving (2014) also noted that income inequality was a more pronounced effect in places where Democrats win. To test this, I included an interaction term between a binary variable indicating if Hillary Clinton won the county in 2016 and the Gini coefficient. While this effect was significant from 2008 through 2016, its coefficient has declined over this period and by 2020 it was only significant to the 5% level, indicating a drop off in its effect.

At the same time, income may still be a good predictor of election results at the county level, albeit through a different lens. Economic prosperity paired with retrospective voting hypotheses have accurately predicted elections for over the past sixty years (Erikson, 1989 and Kahane, 2008). Is it perhaps possible that the economic gains or losses of groups have caused them to vote for or against an incumbent candidate?



Map 4



Map 5

The case for Democrats had been building that 2020 was going to be a continued year of gains with not only heavily Hispanic places but majority-minority locales in general. When they were disappointed as the results came back from Florida and Texas, many questioned what the problem was. Did the Trump campaign do more outreach to Hispanic voters? Was Biden a weak

candidate to turn out Hispanic voters? The answer might be simpler than that. Consider the idea of retrospective economic voting. Rather than look at median income generally, consider it through the lens of zero-sum politics. The following regression runs the same variables of interest as the previous except it factors in gains in income relative to the whole nation from 2017 to 2019 obtained from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. This is done instead than Gini coefficient data, as it was rendered insignificant in recent elections. For reference, consider the data presented in Map 4 and Map 5.

	Model 1 ß/SE	**Model 2 ß/SE**
Log Population	5.16*** (0.26)	6.23*** (0.31)
% Black	0.57*** (0.03)	0.96*** (0.03)
% Asian	0.32* (0.15)	1.57*** (0.18)
% Hispanic	0.09*** (0.02)	0.36*** (0.03)
Log Median Income	-3.88 (2.16)	-16.60*** (2.10)
Gini Coefficient	-2.89 (10.90)	
Clinton Win	21.36 (10.45)	
Gini* Clinton Win	48.71* (22.47)	
% Relative Income Gain		-1.05*** (0.18)
% Bachelors or higher	1.47*** (0.09)	2.63*** (0.09)
R^2	*0.732*	*0.587*

Table 4

While the R^2 values likely decline so much from one model to the other due to the static caught by the removed terms, there is a significant effect on relative income gained or lost

compared to the rest of country in the voting patterns of states. While this trend does not explain the data in places like California, Oregon, and Washington, it may be the key to unlocking why Trump made inroads with Hispanic voters in the Rio Grande Valley and Miami-Dade County: perhaps Trump's policies and rhetoric toward Mexico mattered less when voting compared to their relative economic prosperity. There are signs of retrospective voting regarding economic gains, but it is unclear why these did not persist in other parts of the country.

5 Discussion

Upon review of the increasing coefficient values and increasing values of their significance, I find there is a clear correlation of rural versus urban voting, college-educated versus non-college-educated, and racial voting. There are clear patterns which have established themselves firmly in American politics over the last twenty years regarding partisan voting. While there are likely many reasons why this has happened, I will discuss three which I believe to be the most important: ideologically homogenous parties, decline in social capital, and the strategic decisions by both major parties beholden not to values but electoral advantage.

5.1 Ideologically Homogenous Parties

First, the intraparty ideological cohesion plays a major role in the voting patterns of the electorate. Though not discussed heavily in this paper, there has been a significant decline in split-ticket voting (Desilver, 2016). Throughout much of the 20th century, there was a broad coalition of Democrats, namely in the South who opposed the advancement of Civil Rights and were rather conservative. Comparatively, though not as prominent, were a large coalition of liberal Republicans located throughout the Northeast. Some, like Charlie Baker and Phil Scott, persist today and are quite popular among their constituencies, winning statewide races in

typically Democratic states. Parties with wider ideological spectrums not only caused more bipartisanship, but it caused a greater elasticity in the electorate. The composition of each party played more of a role in this than did any ideological shifts of the electorate.

Furthermore, there is no indication that the electorate has become any more conservative or liberal in the past 60 years. It has merely become easier for voters to identify and choose the candidates that align with their values because of the increasing polarization (Abramowitz & Saunders, 1996). Part of the reason that this polarization has taken so long to manifest itself is the lagging desire of voters to change their party preferences despite the ideological changes of the party. Voters are more apt to vote for candidates bearing their partisan label until they realize that their ideological interests may be better represented by voting for another candidate. On the macro level, that lags the ideological changes of politicians themselves. In other words, this process takes time.

Applying social choice theory aids in understanding how the lines are drawn. Consider this realistic scenario: there are 100 Senators, each with a unique ideological preference drawn on a scale of liberal to conservative. Each Senator votes to accept or reject legislation on the basis of how well it aligns with his or her goals formed on an ideological basis. The choice is binary. When forced to vote on a liberal issue, a liberal Senator will gain some form of discrete utility by voting in favor. Similarly, when forced to vote on a conservative issue, a conservative Senator will gain that same level of satisfaction.

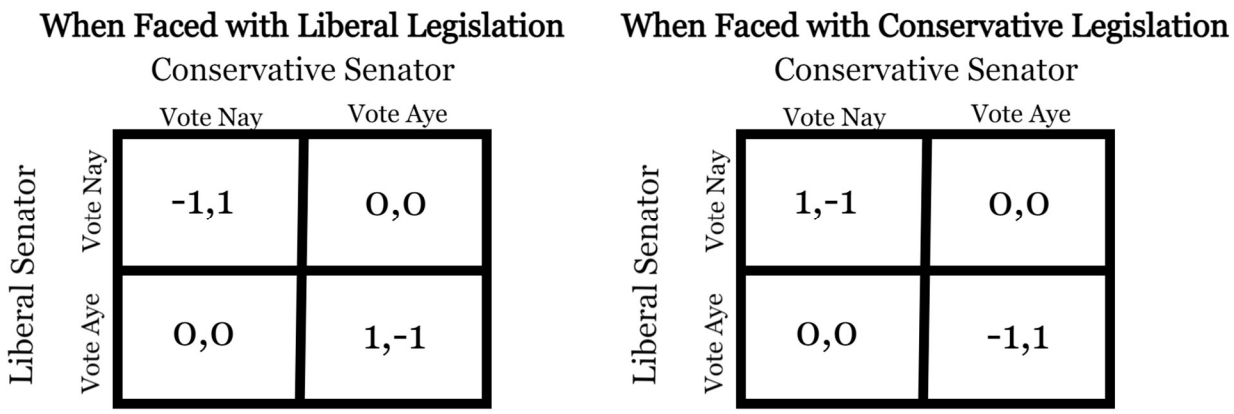


Figure 6

In the two games presented by the payoff matrices in Figure 6, the choice is clear, and each side has a dominant strategy. The game played between both parties is identical. This is the definition of zero-sum: when Democrats win, Republicans lose and vice versa. This game has had interesting effects in actual halls of the Capitol building.

Trying to effectively govern from the minority, senatorial "gangs" remove the median voter from the control of either party. If either party is in power with a comfortable margin, there is no reason for these collectives to spring up. With a majority, each party has their own dominant strategy—to rule with an iron fist.

While it would appear this partisan divide is contrary to legislative progress, different groups have popped up over time to avoid gridlock. In the mid-2000s, the "Gang of Fourteen," consisting of nearly every congressional ideology, formed in the Senate to stop the filibustering of President Bush's judicial appointees (Rudin, 2006) including former presidential candidate John McCain, who cemented his legacy as a maverick in the 2000 election, bucking his party at every turn. There have been smaller bipartisan groups since then including the debt-focused "Gang of Eight" in 2011 (Calmes, 2011) and the separate immigration-focused "Gang of Eight"

in 2013 (Halloran, 2013). Although these groups show a break from the partisan normalcy, they are exactly that: a *break.* They are the exception and not the rule.

In addition to these gangs, there are similar bipartisan groups in the House of Representatives. The bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus has proven to be an effective cluster of legislators, albeit it has faced some criticism from its former members (Pocan, 2018). Despite being effective on some issues, one of the caucus's premier goals was to stand in opposition of Speaker Nancy Pelosi's agenda, and it is safe to say that they have ardently failed to do so. Since 2018, she has successfully led two presidential impeachments as well as the passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Additionally, despite a caucus of 56, which would easily be enough to keep her from becoming the Speaker of the House, they have failed in doing so. While these bipartisan alliances form, they often fail to meet their goals for one reason: it is in no one's best interest.

This is the foundation upon which polarization is built. With ideologically homogenous parties, there is an incentive to govern mercilessly. Bipartisanship is a rarity because there is no individual incentive to deviate from the dominant strategy. In fact, such deviation is harmful in achieving the goals of the group.

When the parties were ideologically heterogenous, bipartisanship was more common because legislators from different parties had similar goals. Party loyalty was not held together by the ideological bonds that it is today. For example, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt infamously tried to oust conservative members of the Democratic party in the midterm elections of 1938. Dubbed "Roosevelt's Purge" by many journalists, he embarked on a tour across the South to campaign for more liberal replacements so he could enact even more liberal policies. Instead of replacing conservatives, Roosevelt found even more of them in Congress in 1939—89

new Republicans in Congress. Only one of the Democrats he opposed (John O'Connor, NY-16) was successfully defeated for a more liberal replacement. The animosity between ideologies has always existed: their alignment within the parties has not.

5.2 Partisanship and Obstructionism

Perhaps the most misused word in modern discourse, polarization must be used to describe the downfall of bipartisanship. If the cooperation between members of either party was bipartisan, polarization is the growing absence of that cooperation. It is an unbroken and unbridled dichotomy which can often be described as hostile. Partisan behavior is not limited to members of Congress. Anyone who finds themselves in a position with a dominant strategy in their vote has no incentive to deviate. This manifests itself at every stage of government. The ways in which parties rule mercilessly are bound by nothing except existing laws themselves.

One of the most common ways that partisanship is affected is through obstructionism. While it can take many forms in American government, no legislative body has defined obstructionism better in the past decade than the United States Senate. In 2009, the Republican minority enacted the filibuster more than it was in the entire 1950s decade (Skocpol and Jacobs, 2012). Another example of recent obstructionism could include the refusal by Republican majorities to take steps necessary to enact liberal priorities. For example, in 2010, a law was passed in response to the financial collapse of 2008 which established the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. For this bureau to function, the Senate needed to vote to confirm President Obama's nominee. The Republican minority threatened to filibuster this vote until legislation was passed that fundamentally changed the agency because they opposed its existence. This did not end until President Obama made a recess appointment (Skocpol & Jacobs, 2012).

Further examples of this polarizing tactic include then Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell refusing to hold votes on President Obama's judicial appointees. During the last two years of his term, only 28.6% of Obama's judicial nominees were confirmed (McMillion, 2019). This included a contentious battle to replace conservative justice Antonin Scalia, who died in February 2016. McConnell at the time was quoted saying, "It is a president's constitutional right to nominate a Supreme Court justice, and it is the Senate's constitutional right to act as a check on a president and withhold its consent… This nomination should not be filled, this vacancy should not be filled by this lame duck president." Four years later, after the passing of Ruth Bader Ginsburg in September 2020, McConnell held a vote to confirm Justice Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court just eight days before the presidential election. Prior to 2016, there were two election year Supreme Court appointments made during modern periods of divided government: in 1988 with Justice Kennedy and the 1956 appointment of Justice Brennan (Wheeler, 2020). There was no precedent to withhold a vote on the nomination of Merrick Garland in 2016, but there was a precedent set in 2016 to withhold a vote on the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett (set in 2016). Obstructionist behavior is beholden to no norms or precedent, only partisanship. This is polarization manifested at the highest level of government.

5.3 New Coalitions and Party Strategy

In contrast, there are some coalitions that are changing over time. For example, as the Republican party has leaned further into the "culture war" aspect (Lemire and Colvin, 2021) of their ambitions, there has been an overwhelming rejection by educated voters. It is not a coincidence that educated voters have swung toward the Democratic presidential candidate in every election since 2000. There has been a rejection of the cultural conservatism presented by the modern Republican party by educated voters. It is also not coincidental that the remaining

liberal Republicans are present in highly educated Northeastern states like Vermont and Massachusetts. The realignment of educated voters is prominent, not accidental, and will continue without reversion until there is a change in party strategies.

Another significant factor in determining the outcome of elections is the strategy of the two major parties. While it is a long held and well documented phenomenon that campaigns themselves have a limited effect on outcomes (Cambell, 2001, Finkel, 1993, and Lazarfeld et al., 1988), it holds logically that the parties themselves dictate which voters actually fill the ballot box and which voters stay home (Aldrich, 1993). Consequently, it follows that each party decides which voters to target in their campaign strategies from the beginning. It is a calculated decision that Republicans have leaned into the culture war aspect of politics. This strategy is popular among less educated voters who usually tend to be more rural. If they believe the national environment to be more favorable to them, by embracing this strategy, they can win states like Ohio where uneducated voters outnumber educated voters. This math also works in their favor in places like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania—all states that handed the presidency to Donald Trump in 2016 despite their Democratic history. Republicans properly strategized the geographic spread of their voters for the electoral college. American presidential elections have been increasingly won at the margins, and the parties have caused this.

In any given year, the electorate is favorable to one party or the other, usually due to their retrospective nature. Each party plays a balancing game in gaining new voters against losing old voters because of the environmental shifts from the last election. In 2016, Donald Trump was able to corner many white rural voters. He effectively brought many working-class whites into the Republican coalition through a message of economic populism. These voters turned out in even larger numbers in 2020, and Joe Biden was able to win by improving his margins with

suburban, more educated voters. Because of the hemorrhaging of the suburbs, the geographic math was no longer in Donald Trump's favor in 2020.

In this suburban loss, the forty-fifth president gained white working-class voters. This is in sharp contrast to minority working class voters who continued to vote Democratic. As part of this, it is clear from the regression in Table 3 that there has been a decline in class voting since 2012. In counties with a higher median income, the general trend has progressed in favor of Democrats since 1988. I find that the Gini coefficient, which Duca and Saving (2014) found to be significant in 2014 in affecting polarization, to be insignificant and decreasing in its ability to explain electoral outcomes at the county level. While still a significant factor, this is also the case in places where Democrats win, a reliable trait beginning in 1972. This is a clear indicator of a shift away from voting based on economic class in recent elections.

To examine the way that economics factor into the way that people are voting, the story may be the same as it always has been. Places which experienced higher levels of growth significantly increased their swing toward Trump in 2020 relative to 2016. This lends itself to zero-sum voting preferences. While most of the United States saw economic growth from 2017 to 2019, it was the places which saw the least growth who voted statistically significantly less for Trump on average, all else equal.

Political psychologists have depicted the downfall of social trust as an indicator of polarization and the fracturing of the American public into the demographic groups that define it today. If better data were available regarding the intricacies of each race, the regressions would likely yield an even higher degree of accuracy. This explanation makes sense: when Americans do not trust one another and feel like the out-group is swindling them, they are more likely to view politics as zero-sum. The emergence of homogenous parties lends itself to this. American

politics today has become a simple model with less nuance than existed previously: voters self-identify into tribalist groups and vote accordingly. It is the emergence of identity politics at the highest level which has played well into the hands of parties. By entering into demographic groups, the parties can leverage those identities against other identities.

The success of the Trump campaign in courting Latino voters was crucial in its 2020 successes in Florida and Texas. The former president improved on his margins in crucial Latino majority places like Miami-Dade County and the Rio Grande Valley which prevented the states from swinging across the aisle to helping elect Joe Biden. As much as voters must choose their candidates, the parties play a role in choosing their voters through coalition building. This is where the role of the parties is most prominent; they must choose the groups that will be most excited by their candidate and in turn must not alienate enough of the old base into staying home or voting for the other candidate according to spatial theory.

5.4 The New Calculus of Voting

When Riker and Ordeshook (1968) first defined their model of the rational calculus of voting as $R = (BP) – C + D,$ it was earthshattering to model decision-making in this way in political science. From left to right, the reward of voting must equal the projected benefits multiplied by the probability that the vote cast makes a difference minus the cost of voting plus the sense of civic duty to vote. The time this was written was at the peak of split-ticket voting during Democrats' incredible run of House control for fifty-six out of sixty years. It was written at a time when Lyndon Johnson carried 73% of the counties in the country, enacted the some of the most liberal legislation the country had ever seen, and in the same year, conservative Richard Nixon would blowout Hubert Humphrey and win 78% of the counties in the country. For the voter described by Riker and Ordeshook (1968), the choice to vote was less determined by zip

code or rural/urban status and more closely tied to other factors like class and educational attainment, but at the same time, these effects were still not as pronounced as they are in today's elections. In a polarized world, the calculus of voting must be modified:

In-Group Reward = (BP) – C + D *or* Out-Group Detriment = (BP) – C + D

Whereas Riker and Ordeshook (1968) looked at the calculus of voting as an individual decision, zero-sum voting requires an approach like war. There can only be one winner in any decision made. Voters must ask themselves: am I a rural voter? am I a white voter? am I a union voter? am I an educated voter? These questions more often than not have led to the current state of affairs. On the other side, if I do not vote, will we lose the election to Hispanics, who are prospering economically relative to us? Will those darned city folks get their way and leave us out to dry? Will the coastal elites leave us out on the line again? These are the questions that led the Rust Belt to vote for Donald Trump in 2016.

Social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1970) wrote that in-groups which discriminated against out-groups often did so in the same ways as other in-groups did. This discrimination differed in who it targeted, but it did not differ in the ways in which is used to form a group identity to rally around. In a similar way, it is the intersectional identities of voters which are pooled together into the two parties as identifiers and used to persuade voters of which side they are on. It is merely the sides which are shifting, or realigning, at this moment along geographic, racial, and educational lines instead of the class-based voting patterns of the past.

It is the intersectional identities of voters which manifest themselves in ways that are hard to measure. For example, our current regression modeling would not be well-equipped to handle well-educated rural voters or Black rural voters. These are the voters that slip through the cracks in these types of analyses, and in a country where presidential elections are increasingly decided

on the margins, this is the type of certainty which must be baked into proper, nuanced election modeling. While they may be fringe compared to the majority, they play a role as important role in American elections as easily definable voting blocs.

As the parties have respectfully taken risks in becoming ideologically homogenous, they have also taken risks in defining themselves along these group identities. There is no example where this is clearer than among the white working-class voters that Trump captured in 2016 who left the modern Democratic party for the first time. With Hillary Clinton choosing to align more strongly with minority candidates and spend time outside of the Rust Belt, the Republican party made a political decision to capture these voters by playing into economic and racial anxieties (Kreutz, 2016). By investing resources into these states, there was a clear play which drew out white working-class voters in the former Blue Wall. The relative prosperity in other areas drew out these voters. In the calculus of voting, the Republican Party was not only able to raise the individual reward by promising a future that resembled the past ("Make America Great Again"), but they were able to capitalize on out-group detriment with slogans like "We're going to build the wall, and Mexico's going to pay for it" and "We can't continue to allow China to rape our country, and that's what they're doing." By singling out these groups, they were able to pull out the "whiteness" of the white working-class which caused them to vote Republican rather than Democrat, in contrast to their economic interests.

5.5 How Parties Pick Their Coalitions

Despite being ideologically homogenous, there are still salient issues which the parties flip-flop on. One example of this is broad healthcare reform. In just the last thirty years, there was a bipartisan consensus (Clymer et al., 1994) on national reform before it was pronounced dead on arrival in the Senate before the Republican-wave election of 1994. Make no mistake, it was not

turned down because it was truly unpopular among Republican Senators—it was turned down to make the president and his party look bad (Starr, 1994). It was a moment of political opportunity to seal the deal for Republicans to make Clinton look like a weak leader going into an election where they thought they had a chance to take back the House of Representatives for the first time in over thirty years due to the declining heterogeneity of the parties.

In her book, *Boomerang: Healthcare Reform and the Turn Against Government* (1997), Theda Skocpol details how the Clinton healthcare plan was crafted in a bipartisan matter, designed to be appealing to both sides, was nationally popular, and had bipartisan support because of the problems it solved. This was the case until Republican strategists saw it as an opportunity. While it may sound cynical, this bill was the perfect opportunity to take out the Democratic majority in Washington, and in 1994, they succeeded.

Another example in the world of healthcare reform is that of the individual mandate. The individual mandate was originally proposed by the conservative think-tank Heritage Foundation in 1989 and introduced in Congress in 1993 by Orrin Hatch and Chuck Grassley among others as part of the Clinton healthcare reform movement (History of the Individual Health Insurance Mandate, 2012). With healthcare measures defeated in the 1990s, it was re-introduced in 2007 as a bipartisan bill led by Oregon Democrat Ron Wyden. It was even a sticking point during the 2008 Democratic primary: Barack Obama was opposed to it—Hillary Clinton was for it. When Obama's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act passed in 2010 with no Republican support, the individual mandate was in. When something is politically expedient, either side will adopt it no matter their values.

6 Conclusion

I find a significant, strong correlation within the realignment across all tested demographic groups, as well as across the rural and urban divide. I also find a significant decrease in class-based voting, as Democrats have cornered poorer urban votes while Republican have cornered poorer rural votes. Further, I find significant evidence to support retroactive economic-based voting hypotheses in the wake of the 2020 election, as places which did better economically from 2017 to 2019 voted for Donald Trump at a significantly higher rate than places which did not.

I suggest these shifts toward realignment and partisan polarization are not a choice of the electorate but rather a choice of the parties to move toward homogeneity among their elected and vocal membership. This is because both parties found it to be politically opportunistic to do so, just as they find other things politically opportunistic and capitalize on them accordingly such as their stances on healthcare reform and Supreme Court appointments. This polarization also takes place at a time when social trust has fallen precipitously in the United States, and the zero-sum nature of polarized politics lends itself rather well to that idea, though it is impossible to statistically test its origins, as their interactions with one another may be ouroboric.

I also note the findings of this thesis, while supported from its OLS regression, are incomplete due to the geographic nature of the modeling and must be cross-checked with individual attitudes found both qualitatively and quantitatively with studies to improve its validity and work toward a better understanding of the new political alignment, which is still developing. It should be viewed in a Bayesian manner, as part of a larger whole in the understanding of increasing polarization.

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